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## **Chinese and Western Comedy – an Introduction into Cross-Cultural Humour Research between Taiwan, China and the West**

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#### ***Abstract***

The use of humour, both proper and improper, can influence the outcomes of meetings and shape entire relationships. Hence, although often trivial in nature, humour can play a significant role in human lives and deserves to be taken seriously. The same is true when it comes to the analysis of humour across cultures. In today's increasingly globalized world, where people from various cultures interact on an almost daily basis it is important to understand the other persons culture, including their sense of humour. Consequently, this article provides a basic overview of humour of the world's two biggest and most prominent cultures: the English speaking West and the Sinitic world. There is no doubt Chinese and Western humour differ in history and contemporary structure, therefore this article presents the various forms of comedic expression found in both cultures, but also provides basic explanations as to the reasons behind these differences.

**Keywords:** humour, comedy, Taiwan, China, jokes, funny, stand-up, xiangsheng, cultural differences

## Китайская и западная комедия - введение в исследование межкультурного юмора между Тайванем, Китаем и Западом

### Аннотация

Использование юмора, как правильного, так и ненадлежащего, может повлиять на результаты встреч и сформировать целые отношения. Следовательно, хотя юмор часто бывает тривиальным по своей природе, он может играть важную роль в жизни человека и заслуживает серьезного отношения. Та же закономерность имеет место, когда речь идет об анализе юмора в разных культурах. В современном все более глобализирующемся мире, где люди из разных культур взаимодействуют почти ежедневно, важно понимать культуру других людей, включая их чувство юмора. Следовательно, эта статья предоставляет базовый обзор юмора двух крупнейших и наиболее выдающихся культур мира: англоязычного Запада и синитического мира. Нет сомнений в том, что китайский и западный юмор отличаются друг от друга историей и современной структурой, поэтому в этой статье представлены различные формы комедийного выражения, обнаруженные в обеих культурах, а также приведены основные объяснения причин этих различий.

**Ключевые слова:** юмор, комедия, Тайвань, Китай, шутки, застой, сяньшэн, культурные различия

The study of *humour* (or *humor* in American English) is a complex matter. Despite much academic focus on the issue, there is still no consensus on the very definition of humour, as various theories are in opposition to each other or fall short of explaining the concept fully due to their inability to encompass all the types and reasons behind humorous laughter.

To make things more complex, the study of humour in any foreign language and culture is a particularly intricate endeavour – something any foreign language learner can confirm. But even with a perfect command of another language's vocabulary, syntax and grammar, understanding a simple joke can be beyond a foreigner's grasp because of slang, difference of values and the sheer number of unique contexts any single culture has.

All of this is especially true in the case of Chinese humour, as the Chinese language and culture are profoundly different from Western languages and cultures – which themselves vary in their approach to humour. The economic rise of the People's Republic of China in the past few decades has increased worldwide interest in Chinese language, culture and history – however many

areas of Eastern culture remain secretive and mysterious to Westerners. One such area is definitely humour.

The reasons why Chinese humour is so obscure in the West are various and include, but are not limited to: the complexity of the Chinese language, differences in values, censorship in Mainland China and Mainland Chinese media, and the limited impact of Chinese pop culture outside of Asia. All of this has led some to believe that Chinese speakers are devoid of any sense of humour whatsoever, but this perception is not correct. The unique civilizational, cultural, linguistic, religious and ideological background of Asia has caused the Chinese to develop their own unique forms and approaches to humour – however, in ways that aren't always compatible with Western humour, and vice versa. Much of this is also true for Taiwan, however with its rich cultural diversity, colonial past, free society, high level of globalization, and vibrant popular culture, the island makes for a significantly important example for the study of Chinese culture and humour, and its ability to absorb other cultures' influences.

### What is humour?

Defining humour is not easy, as even it is not certain whether the word *humour* is the correct choice. Before any definitions can be provided, a distinction needs to be made between the words *humour* and *comedy*, but also *funniness* – in Chinese *yōumò* (幽默) and *xǐjù* (喜劇), and *yǒuqù* / *hǎoxiào* (有趣 / 好笑) respectively. Bohdan Dziemidok believes there is no need to distinguish between *comedy* and *funniness* (Polish *komizm* and *śmieszność*) as it only causes terminological confusion. But despite his opposition, Dziemidok refers to various theoreticians who in general defined comedy as “a creative always funny aesthetic experience”, while funniness as “not always a comedic experience devoid of a clear social meaning”. (Dziemidok, 2006, p. 9–13) Hence, comedy can be considered a higher form of funniness – and this article definitely focuses on such an understanding of comedy: as a form of humor that is creative and aesthetic, and provided by a professional performer (i.e. a comedian). However, Brzozowska points out that the words *comedy* and *humour* can be used interchangeably, especially if translated between languages – while most English scholars refer to the word *humour* in

their research, Polish scholars tend to use the word *komizm* (comedy) when describing the same issues. (Brzozowska, 2000, p. 13–17) Hence, although this paper focuses first and foremost on comedy, the word *humour* is of equal, if not greater importance. In general, the underlying paradigm of this text is that **all comedy is humour, but not all humour is comedy**.

The issue of *humour* is quite convoluted itself, as there is no one single precise definition of the word and phenomenon. There is a number of contrasting and overlapping theories on the nature of humour, and different researchers refer to different numbers of theories when describing humour. For example, Dorota Brzozowska in her book „*O dowcipach polskich i angielskich*” and Mary Beard in her book “*Laughter in Ancient Rome*” both refer to 3 theories (superiority theory, incongruity theory, relief theory). Noël Carroll in his book “*Humour: A Very Short Introduction*” provides 5 theories (superiority theory, incongruity theory, release theory, play theory, and Jerrold Levinson’s dispositional theory). (Carroll, 2014, p. 8) Bohdan Dzemidok in his book „*O komizmie*” refers to 6 theories (superiority theory, degradation theory, contrast theory, contradiction theory, departing from the norm theory, and mixed theories), (Dziemidok, 2006, p. 12–13) but hints at the possibility of the existence of a larger number of theories. Mathew M. Hurley et al in their book “*Inside Jokes. Using Humour to Reverse-Engineer the Mind*” refer to the following theories: biological theories, play theories, superiority theories, release theories, incongruity and incongruity-resolution theories, surprise theories, and Bergson’s mechanical humor theory. (Hurley et al, 2016, p. 86–87).

Currently, as of 2018, the most widely recognized theory is the so called ***incongruity theory*** of humour, as it is the most far reaching. According to Carroll, Francis Hutcheson was one of the earliest proponents of this theory. Hutcheson claimed that humour is a contrast between grandeur, dignity, sanctity, and perfection on one side, and meanness, baseness, profanity on the other. Carroll says “incongruity is a comparative notion. It presupposes that something is discordant with something else. With respect to comic amusement, that something else is how the world is or should be”. (Carroll 2014, p. 16-18) In general, **the incongruity theory stipulates that comic amusement arises because of deviations from established norms**.

Despite its popularity, Hurley et al point out that the incongruity theory is not free from flaws and shortcomings. According to them, not everyone

agrees on the very definition of *incongruity* itself, but also many disagree on its exact role in creating humour, and consequentially the theory is not explanatory but only descriptive in nature. (Hurley et al, 2016, p. 71–102) Dziemidok's *contradiction theory* (*teoria sprzeczności* in Polish) is in fact a form of the incongruity theory, but Dziemidok simply prefers to use the word *contradiction* over *incongruity* – while I personally would choose to call it *teoria niespójności* in Polish, to keep the terminology in accordance with the majority of English language research. (Dziemidok, 2006, p. 33).

The other popular theories of humour are the *superiority theory* and the *release theory*, and while popular in the past, currently they are not as popular as the incongruity theory. The superiority theory claims that humour and laughter arise from the sense of feeling better (i.e. *superior*) to others, and even feeling contempt for them. This theory was first proposed by Thomas Hobbes, although Aristotle also seems to be a proponent of a similar approach. (Hurley et al, 2016, p. 86–87) And while many jokes indeed have elements of superiority, as they mock and show contempt for others, Carroll points out that many jokes do not have these characteristics, such as linguistic jokes (puns), self-deprecating jokes, instances where people enjoy being teased, and humour of children who lack a sense of self and superiority. (Carroll, 2014, p. 8–15) Dziemidok splits this theory into two groups of theories: the *theories of negative traits of the comic object and the superiority of the subject over the object of the comic experience* and the *theories of degradation*. (Dziemidok, 2006, p. 13–20).

The release theory claims that people have amounts of cognitive energy built up in their minds, and once they are suddenly and surprisingly released, it results in laughter and the feeling of humorous arousal – especially in emotionally charged jokes. Proponents of this line of thought include Sigmund Freud and Herbert Spencer. However, this theory has lost its popularity, as there is little to no evidence of the aforementioned 'energy', as well as the theory fails to explain instances of e.g. logical jokes. However, instead of 'energy' one can refer to 'expectations', and as a result new research suggests the theory, or at least parts of it, might make a comeback in the near future. (Hurley et al, 2016, p. 83–85).

But despite this lack of precise definition of the term *humour*, an attempt can be made to characterize and differentiate Western from Chinese humour.

### What is Western humour?

Jan Bremmer and Herman Roodenburg in their book “*A Cultural History of Humour*” point to the fact that historically the term *humour* originally referred to four bodily fluids that had to remain in balance with each other in order for the body to remain healthy: blood, phlegm, black bile, and yellow bile. (Bremmer, Roodenburg, 2005, p. 1) Carroll points out that fun sensations and laughter were considered to destroy this natural balance within the body. Only with time did the term *humour* begin to be synonymous with funniness. (Carroll, 2014, p. 5).

In “*The Encyclopedia of Humour Studies*” Salvatore Attardo says that the word *humour* started to get its modern meaning somewhere between 1500 and 1800, as consciousness of humour and humour related phenomena started to develop with the presence of literary and cultural activities, such as irony, burlesque, and parody. He claims that this awareness started as a purely English phenomenon, and only later, in the 18th century it spread across the rest of Europe. (Attardo, 2014, p. 293–294) Bremmer and Roodenburg claim that in its modern meaning the word *humour* was first used in 1682 in England and a 1709 text by Lord Shaftesbury titled “*Sensus comunis: an Essay on the Freedom of Wit and Humour*” was one of the earliest writings to use the word in its modern meaning. Supposedly Voltaire believed the term to be of French origin, however from 1725 most French considered the word to be of English origin, as even Victor Hugo in 1862 referred to humour as ‘that English thing’, and it was not until 1870 that the French started to pronounce it according to French pronunciation. (Bremmer, Roodenburg, 2005, p. 1).

Mike Celestino in his documentary “*That’s not Funny*” says that modern American comedy has its roots in *vaudeville* performances – popular, late 19th century theatrical displays of various genres, which besides comedians, also included musicians, magicians, and acrobats. Celestino says that the humour of vaudeville was unrefined, often racist or sexually suggestive in nature. In general, the comedy performances were crude and indecent, and came to be labeled as *blue comedy* – a term that is in use till today. With the advent of film, vaudeville expanded its reach, but because film still lacked sound, performers were forced to rely on *slapstick* (physical) comedy, which

focused on the portrayal of pain – with a prime example being Charlie Chaplin's style of comedy. (*That's Not Funny*, 2014).

In recent decades the world has experienced a rise in popularity of American style *stand-up comedy* – a form of single-person comedic performance, which for many Americans and Westerners has become ubiquitous with comedy itself. According to Celestino stand-up also has its roots in vaudeville, but started to get its modern shape only in the 1950s and 1960s during performances in resorts in upstate New York. Celestino mentions a wide number of comedians as being precursors of the genre, but he points out to 3 comedians as being the most influential of them all: **George Carlin**, **Richard Pryor** and **Lenny Bruce**. Besides being masters of their craft, these performers also pushed the boundaries of what was permitted to be said on stage. They did not shy away from taboo topics and issues, such as the use of profanity in Bruce's and Carlin's case (especially Carlin's famous *seven dirty words*) and Pryor's take on racism and racial slurs. Celestino says that while Bruce was intent on breaking established rules from the beginning of his career, Pryor and Carlin started out as polite, well-dressed and inoffensive performers who only with time evolved into what they became famous and remembered for – foul mouthed social critics with a bite.

Modern stand-up comedy has since evolved into a very sophisticated genre with many different subtypes: from the clean observational humour of Jerry Seinfeld, through the loud rage-fueled Bill Burr and foul mouthed Jimmy Carr, to the dark and twisted comedy of Anthony Jeselnik, with many, many more types. Basically, every single performer provides his own highly personal approach, as the subject and type of jokes, as well as the general demeanor and pace of performance depend completely on the performer's character, inspiration and creativity. The immense diversity of stand-up comedy can be seen at the annual *Just For Laughs* festival in Montreal – the largest comedy event of any kind in the world, with many performances both in English and in French. (More details to be found on [www.justforlaughs.com](http://www.justforlaughs.com) and [www.hahaha.com](http://www.hahaha.com)).

In North America stand-up comedy culture is strong. Throughout the United States and Canada one can find many comedy clubs offering *open mic* shows to basically anyone willing to try their luck in stand-up. A prime example is *Yuk Yuk's*, Canada's top chain of comedy clubs. This highly developed

‘comedy infrastructure’ allows for a grassroots approach to comedy, where basically anyone anywhere can practice and discover their comedic skills – without any mentors necessary. ([www.yukyuks.com](http://www.yukyuks.com))

Of course stand-up is not the only form of comedic expression in America and the Western world. Other forms are also present, such as *sketch comedy* (not to be mixed with the much smaller and shorter *skits!*) and *improvisational comedy* (known simply as *improv*). Sketch comedy is an almost theatrical form, where humorous scenes tend to be well written and well practised before being shown to the audience. One of the most famous examples of sketch comedy was the legendary 1970’s British group *Monty Python*, famous for its surreal and absurd style of comedy. Today sketch comedy can be seen in e.g. *Second City* comedy clubs in the United States and Canada, or especially on the popular, and well established, American TV show *Saturday Night Live* (abbreviated as *SNL*) – which has left an immense impact on American culture and comedy. Many famous SNL comedians have made successful careers in other branches of entertainment –such as actors (Will Ferrell, Steve Carrell, Eddie Murphy etc.), talk show hosts (Jimmy Fallon, Seth Meyers), directors and writers (Mike Meyers), even politicians (Al Franken), but also some of the most famous stand-up comedians of all time (Chris Rock). (More information about former and current SNL comedians can be found on the website <http://www.nbc.com/saturday-night-live/explore/season-1>).

Improv shares much in common with sketch comedy, and is often used as a method for creating the early forms of sketches, but is much more spontaneous in nature. In improv nothing is pre-decided and all is done on the spot, off the top of the heads of performers, often based on suggestions from the audience. It is best exemplified by the popular show *Whose Line is it Anyway?* with separate American and British versions of the show. And while doing proper improv requires a lot of skill, this comedic form is recently gaining ground in Western cities, with many amateur improv groups forming and audience-participation shows taking place. The reason for this is possibly the alluring and inviting nature of improv towards total beginners, who are drawn towards the fun games and techniques of the form, but are not scared of being put on the spot, as with sketches, and especially stand-up. (More about improv can be found on the website: [www.colinandbradshow.com/#about](http://www.colinandbradshow.com/#about)).



Having the above in mind, let us now focus on Chinese humour and form of comedic expression.

### What is Chinese humour?

The Chinese word for humour is *yōumò* (幽默), and it was coined by *Dr. Lín Yǔtáng* (林語堂), a Chinese writer who spent his lifetime (1895-1976) advocating the literature of humour, and who introduced Western style humour to China. The term *yōumò* is a literal translation of the English word *humour*. *Dr. Lín* was a skilled translator proficient in English and educated in the West, who thanks to his work eventually became known as *yōumò dàshī* (幽默大師) – ‘master of humour’. However, the history of Chinese humoristic expression does not begin with the introduction of the Western concept of humor – other, more native Chinese concepts predate it by centuries. *Li-Chi Lee Chen*, following *Yue Xiaodong*, claims that Chinese history has more than 3000 years, with various well established forms, the oldest being *huájī* (滑稽) – a term that dates all the way back to 2500 BC. *Huájī* is a very wide term that has several meanings: mean, obscene, witty, ironic (sarcastic), and humorous. *Yue*, following *Liao Chaochih*, claims that *yōumò* and *huájī* are not the same, as *yōumò* contains more wisdom and elegance than *huájī*, but nevertheless *huájī* contains elements of modern humor such as funny action, ridiculous speech and witty thought. (*Lee Chen*, 2017) (*Yue*, 2010, p. 403–405).

*Yue* claims that traditionally humour has been given little respect in Chinese culture, as Confucianism puts an emphasis on keeping proper manners of social interactions, and says that humour has been considered a show of “intellectual and political shallowness, and is equated with social informality, impropriety, and immaturity”. *Yue* says that supposedly in 500 BC Confucius himself once ordered the execution of several humorists for their indecency while performing for dignitaries. Nevertheless, *Lee Chen* says that according to some scholars it is possible that Confucius was a humour person himself – although it remains a highly contested view. *Yue* simply states that while Confucius was genuinely humorous to life he was not to his attitudes to life. (*Yue*, 2010, p. 403–405; 412) (*Lee Chen*, 2017, p. 15).

The Confucian approach to laughter and humour stands in contrast to the beliefs of Buddhism and Taoism. *Yue* says that Buddhism perceives laughter

as a moment of clarity and enlightenment, something good for the spirit. In the case of Taoism, Yue says that Lin Yu-tang claimed that the two founders of Taoism, Laozi and Zhuangzi, were the founders of Chinese humour, as they shared a passion for laughter and paradoxes in life, but differed in their preferences of details of humour: Laozi enjoyed wit, insightfulness, and seriousness, while Zhuangzi preferred sarcasms, trickery, and playfulness – but in general it can be said that Taoism values humour as a form of peaceful and harmonious interaction with the nature. (Yue, 2010, p. 408–410).

Modern Chinese culture is rich in forms of comedic expression, which in Mainland China are jointly grouped under the term *qǔyì* (曲艺) – a word which describes any narrative art forms based on monologues and dialogues that are not treated as full-fledged theatrical performances. These forms of comedic expression are: *xiàngshēng* (相声), *xiǎopǐn* (小品), *kuàibǎn* (快板), *èrrénzhuàn* (二人转) and others. (Yue, 2010, p. 403–405).

*Xiàngshēng* (相声) translated as *crossstalk*, is a performance of usually two entertainers dressed in traditional clothes who engage in a quick, banter style dialogue with many allusions and puns. It is the most basic and widely recognized form of Chinese comedy, which according to Lee Chi developed in the 19th century. Besides talking, *xiàngshēng* has many other components it can draw from, such as music and singing (from folk songs to Peking opera). Sometimes Western comedy is translated as *dānkǒu xiàngshēng* (单口相声) or *single mouth xiàngshēng*. (Lee Chen, 2017, p. 14) (*Crosstalk: A Window into the World of Chinese Humour*, 2015) (Also YouTube video *Chinese Comedy: Cross Talking with Julien Gaudfroy*, 2010).

*Xiǎopǐn* (小品) is a form of Chinese comedy that is very similar to Western sketch comedy: actors play out humorous scenes. One of the most famous *xiǎopǐn* actors is *Sòng Xiǎobǎo* (宋小宝).

*Kuàibǎn* (快板) is a truly unique form, as it involves a single performer who tells a humorous story while simultaneously playing a rhythm using rattling bamboo clappers in his hands. Sometimes it is compared to Western rap, although it is not the same. *Kuàibǎn* performers wear traditional clothes during their performances.

*Èrrénzhuàn* (二人转) is a comedic form from North Western China, that involves singing and dancing (hence the word *zhuàn* – to turn). It became popular due to its humorous and sexually suggestive content. Although initially

limited to the North East, it has gained popularity throughout China (but not Taiwan) as èrrénzhuàn performer *Zhào Běnnshān* (趙本山) has become one of China's most recognized TV personalities and comedians. Zhào has also influenced the genre in a way that made it more family friendly and appealing to the masses.

### Taiwanese humour

The cultural connections between Taiwan and China are numerous, and the same applies to Chinese and Taiwanese humour. The most significant connection is in the earlier mentioned 'master of humour' Lín Yǔtáng, who after the Communist takeover of Mainland China moved with the fleeing Nationalists to Taipei, and lived there for much of the remainder of his life. Another one is Hong Kong movie director Zhōu Xīngchí (周星馳), also known as Stephen Chow, who despite not being Taiwanese has left a significant imprint on the collective Taiwanese sense of humour with the style of comedy seen in his movies. Lee Chen refers to Zhōu movies' style of humour as wúlítóu (無厘頭) or nonsense humour in English.

Today the Taiwanese entertainment industry is highly influential in the Chinese speaking world. The prime example of this is **Cài Kāngyǒng** (蔡康永) and his female co-host Xúxīdì (徐熙娣), known as **Xiǎo S** (小S). Their show, *Kāngxīláile* (康熙來了), in both Taiwan and China. Lee Chen in his book "*Taiwanese and Polish Humour – a Sociopragmatic Analysis*" uses it as a staple of Taiwanese humour, which he analyzes in depth. Lee Chen says one can see the following methods being used to illicit humour in audiences: personal narratives, wordplay, sarcasm, innuendo, humour that deprecates others, self-deprecating humour, self-bragging, and wúlítóu nonsense. (Lee Chen, 2017, p. 102–141) Interestingly enough, Cài and Xú have recently lost some of their fame in Taiwan, as they decided to move to work in China – something many Taiwanese disapprove of. Cài and Xú's current Mainland Chinese show is called *Tǎnbái ba! Huāhuā shìjiè* (坦白吧! 花花世界), and is hardly watched by anyone in Taiwan.

Kāngxīláile is not the only show of its format. It represents a type of programs known as *Zōngyì jiémù* (綜藝節目) translated into English as *variety shows*. In a Western context, they are most similar to talk shows,

although they do not follow the same paradigm. While Western shows focus on showcasing individual talent, be it either the host's, guest's, or guest performer's, variety shows aim for a group experience, where one single person's personality, never or hardly ever, gets to shine out – hence two hosts, group conversations, animations, quirky sounds etc.

One of the most famous hosts of a variety show is *Wú Zōngxiàn* (吳宗憲) known also as Jacky Wu. According to my personal observations, currently he is often considered by many Taiwanese as the funniest person in Taiwan. As a proper variety show host, he has many talents and traits he tends to showcase on his show or in his performances. For example, besides having good interpersonal skills Wú is extremely skilled at singing. From a Western perspective, this is unusual, as while there are hosts and comedians known for being able to sing, such as Jimmy Fallon or Bo Burnham, they are definitely the exception rather than the general rule.

Another famous Taiwanese comedian was Hsieh Yu-chen (he passed away in 2017) known as Zhū Gēliàng (豬哥亮) – a stage name that means *Pig Brother*, but also is a word play on the name of the famous historical figure Zhū Gēliàng (諸葛亮), a politician and military commander from the Three Kingdoms period. Hsieh's comedy was highly characterized by the fact that it was performed not in Mandarin Chinese but mostly Taiwanese Minnan, and also that due to its coarseness, crudity, and chauvinism it appealed only to older Taiwanese audiences, while repelled younger ones.

### **A comparison between Taiwanese and Chinese humour**

As a wealthy developed economy, Taiwan's' pop-culture is rich and vibrant – and highly popular in China. Various Taiwanese personalities and performers, from musicians, through actors, to comedians are recognized in Mainland China – despite there being much censorship in the country. However, based on my personal observations, Chinese pop culture and especially modern comedy are barely known in Taiwan, or considered not funny nor entertaining by modern Taiwanese. The Taiwanese simply are not interested in Chinese media, celebrities, and humour, and it remains an open question on whether this is an political issue, strained by Taiwan's difficult relationship with Beijing combined with a disregard for everything

Chinese, or if it is an issue of perceived lower quality of Chinese media – or possibly both.

While coming from the same origin, Taiwanese and Chinese humour do have apparent differences that set them apart. Yue describes communism's effect on Chinese humour – something Taiwan has not experienced. After the communists took power in the Mainland, they limited the use of humour to praising instead of satirizing, and during the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976) Chinese humour basically ceased to develop. It was not until the late 1970's that humour re-experienced a renaissance, as performers were allowed to target the past period's zealotry. (Yue, 2010, p. 413–415) This might have created a gap between China and Taiwan, as in the meantime Taiwan continued to develop its culture and entertainment.

In terms of modern Chinese humour one cannot underestimate the importance of CCTV New Year's Gala, known as *chūnwǎn* (春晚), a several hour long show broadcast live on Chinese New Year's Eve and seen by hundreds of millions of Chinese – but hardly anyone in Taiwan. The show includes comedic performances. For many years the main comedian was *Zhào Běishān* (赵本山), what made him one of the most famous and recognized entertainers in modern China – but yet again, hardly anyone knows about him in Taiwan. (Chinese New Year Gala's YouTube page – [www.youtube.com/user/springfestivalgala/search?query=赵本山](http://www.youtube.com/user/springfestivalgala/search?query=赵本山)).

Another issue I observed that separates Taiwanese and Chinese humour is the knowledge of, and naming various Chinese comic forms. While *xiàngshēng* (相声) and *xiǎopǐn* (小品) are known and recognized on both sides of the Taiwan strait, the term *èrénzhuàn* (二人转) and even the general *qǔyì* (曲艺) are not recognized by the average Taiwanese person. On a similar note, the term *kuàibǎn* (快板) is not known in Taiwan, as the Taiwanese call it *shùláibǎo* (數來寶).

### A comparison between Chinese and Western humour

Gert Jan Hofstede in his article "*Humour across cultures: an appetizer*" analyzes different cultures' humour through the lens of the Hofstede Cultural Dimensions Theory. According to it, Chinese and Western cultures (here exemplified by the United States) differ significantly in 4 out of 6 cultural

dimensions: power distance, individualism, long term orientation and indulgence. The sharpest and most clear difference is in the individualism vs collectivism dimension, with China and Taiwan being highly collectivist, while the United States is highly individualist, even for Western standards. Hofstede describes the difference as follows:

This dimension is about affiliation. To a collectivist mindset, fixed membership of a single group in which all members are interdependent is the natural state of being human. No member of the natural group can be cast aside. This means that maintaining a semblance of harmony is crucial. To an individualist mindset, on the other hand, individual self-sufficiency is the natural state of being. Everybody should be judged in the same way, whether or not the person be a group member. Honest people speak their minds, even if that means open disagreement (Hofstede, 2009).

Following Edward Hall, Hofstede describes that collectivist cultures tend to communicate implicitly, non-verbally and indirectly, while individualist cultures communicate explicitly, verbally and directly – hence in individualistic cultures jokes can be told separately from the rest of the conversation, as they are valuable in themselves. Following Davies, Hofstede claims individualistic cultures have been most prolific in producing jokes. Hence, this perfectly explains the popularity of stand-up comedy as a comedic medium in America, where it is a single individual's effort to illicit a humorous response. (Hofstede, 2009).

On the other hand, Hofstede says collectivistic societies tend to adopt more contextual forms of humour. This explains why various Chinese forms of comedy, from *xiàngsheng* to *zōngyì jiémù* variety shows, have more than one performer on stage at a time – to make it a group and collective experience. Similarly, *kuàibǎn* despite being a one man show, hides the performer's personality and individuality behind the strict rules of the art form – playing a rhythm with bamboo clappers, traditional clothing, and possibly a well-established story not written by the performer. Similarly, *zōngyì jiémù* variety shows focus on group conversations accompanied with silly animations and quirky sounds, all moderated by two multitalented hosts – as to make sure

no aspect of the show focuses for too long on a single person, and does not destroy the collective feeling of the episode.

Canadian Mark Rowswell, known in China as *Dàshān* (大山) has made a career as a Western comedian in China. His career began with a 1989 Chinese New Year Gala sketch performance, which unbeknownst to him was broadcast live to over 500 million Chinese. Since then, he has become the most famous Westerner in the country, and has devoted himself to the study of Chinese humour, as well to the promotion of Western style comedy (stand-up) in China. In an 2014 interview for *Kong Fu Komedu* he claims that although he has studied *xiàngsheng* he cannot perform it anymore. The reason for this is that he has already used much of the material he was taught, and he had trouble writing new material, as he considers it all to be “too scripted” and cumbersome. Western style stand-up comedy offers him more creative freedom, and hence currently he sees himself as a bridge between the East and the West. (The interview can be found on YouTube under the title *The Most Famous Foreigner in China* (2014) <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6rXGg8VkVKg>).

Another foreigner-comedian in China is Julien Gaudfroy. Although he is known less than *Dàshān*, he has very interesting observations regarding Chinese humour. In an interview he explains his cooperatin with *xiàngsheng* master *Dīng Guǎngquán* (丁广泉) who has helped him and a number of other foreigners understand (including Mark Rowswell/*Dàshān*) the Chinese mindset and sense of humour. In general, Gaudfroy says that learning Chinese humour and comedy (which he stresses needs to be done in practice, in front of an audience, not behind books) is a very good way of understanding Chinese culture and the Chinese mindset, but that it is very difficult. Possibly it is so difficult, that it scares many foreigners, to the point they fail to notice that *xiàngsheng* is in fact comedy and funny. Gaudfroy says that at one point he was guilty of the same – but as he learned to speak and think like a Chinese person, he also learned to appreciate the Chinese sense of humour. (The interview can be found on YouTube under the title *Chinese Comedy: Cross Talking with Julien Gaudfroy* (2010) <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kL-MriW6Bjw>).

## Conclusion

While Western stand-up comedy is progressively becoming more popular world-wide, Chinese comedy remains a mystery to many – to the point that some claim China lacks humour and comedy. Both Jimmy O. Yang, a Hong Kong-born American comedian, and Russell Peters, a Canadian comedian of Indian roots, have both joked that China is a place devoid of humour. (Russell Peters says so in his comedy special “*Outsourced*”, while Jimmy O. Yang said so during a 2018 interview with Stephen Colbert, which can be found here: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=H9\\_pg-gTOR8](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=H9_pg-gTOR8)). Although funny, their statements are simply not true.

There is no doubt China and Taiwan have a rich culture of humour – both historically and currently – even despite Confucianism’s ambivalent or even hostile stance to it. And while Chinese comedy forms are not known outside of the Sinitic world (and sometimes even within), there is no doubt that the forms are varied, unique and numerous – and quite often distinct from what can be seen in the West.

While Western comedy puts an emphasis on individuality and individual creativity, especially in the case of stand-up comedy but also in improv and to a limited extent in sketch comedy, Taiwanese and Chinese comedy are about a group experience, hence often one can see two hosts, group conversations, and various other additions to comedy (music, sounds, signing, animations) and even when comedians perform by themselves, they are ‘hidden’ behind strict rules that apply to the form of their choice – e.g. traditional clothing, postures, instruments. And while some says it limits the forms and makes them too rigid, such as Mark Rowswell / *Dàshān*, others, such as Julien Gaudfroy point out it takes much time to learn to understand and appreciate these forms – as it is a great way to understand the Chinese mindset and culture. Hence, it is clear that Chinese humour and comedy still needs to be researched, and even further compared to Western comedy, humour and culture.



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